

the same spirit, both are illumined by the same glory. This connection between them is a spiritual one; hence it is a bond that will abide forever. Likewise do they enjoy strong and lasting ties in the physical world as well, for if the marriage is based both on the spirit and the body, that union is a true one, hence it will endure. If, however, the bond is physical and nothing more, it is sure to be only temporary, and must inexorably end in separation.[2]

Similarly Shoghi Effendi writes that although the sexual aspect of marriage is not unimportant, the spiritual side is more important: "Bahá'u'lláh has urged marriage upon all people as the natural and rightful way of life. He has also, however, placed strong emphasis on its spiritual nature, which, while in no way precluding a normal physical life, is the most essential aspect of marriage. That two people should live their lives in love and harmony is of far greater importance than that they should be consumed with passion for each other. The one is a great rock of strength on which to lean in time of need; the other a purely temporary thing which may at any time die out." [3]

If a couple succeed in achieving this state of spiritual harmony, then they will be happy in their married life, otherwise, `Abdu'l-Bahá warns that problems will arise.

The Lord . . . hath made woman and man to abide with each other in the closest companionship, and to be even as a single soul. They are two helpmates, two intimate friends, who should be concerned about the welfare of each other.

If they live thus, they will pass through this world with perfect contentment, bliss, and peace of heart, and become the object of divine grace and favour in the Kingdom of heaven. But if they do other than this, they will live out their lives in great bitterness, longing at every moment for death, and will be shamefaced in the heavenly realm.

Strive, then, to abide, heart and soul, with each other as two doves in the nest, for this is to be blessed in both worlds.[4]

The couple are encouraged to "exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other . . . Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity." [5] The first goal in Bahá'í marriage is, therefore, to achieve a state of spiritual unity and companionship.

Separation and divorce, although permitted by Bahá'u'lláh, are nevertheless strongly discouraged. "Truly, the Lord loveth union and harmony and abhorreth separation and divorce." [6] The unity of the family is a foundational aspect of the unity of society that Bahá'u'lláh seeks to bring about. The Bahá'í scriptures, therefore, condemn divorce as a factor leading to social disintegration and a disruption of the family life necessary for the successful bringing up of children. It should therefore only be considered as "a last resort." [7]

Children and Family Life

If a husband and wife are truly united in a spiritual and physical marriage, then great results can come from that marriage. The most important of these is the raising of children.

Thus the husband and wife are brought into affinity, are united and harmonized, even as though they were one person. Through their mutual union, companionship and love great results are produced in the world, both material and spiritual. The spiritual result is the appearance of divine bounties. The material result is the children who are born in the cradle of the love of God . . . Such children are those of whom it was said by Christ, "Verily, they are the children of the Kingdom!"[8]

The first person to have extensive contact with a baby is usually the mother. While certain norms are acknowledged in the Bahá'í writings, such as the mother being "the first educator of the child"[9] and the father having the responsibility to "provide for and protect the family,"[10] these are not intended to be applied inflexibly. It may occur in some families that the wife earns the family's income and the husband looks after the children. Responsibility for the education of children rests, however, with both parents. It is up to the couple to decide what is the best way to fulfil this responsibility. The seriousness of this responsibility may mean that other activities may have to be sacrificed in order to perform this one well.

The important task for the parents is to create an atmosphere of love and unity within the household. This is the atmosphere in which each individual, whether parent or child, can best develop herself or himself.

Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquillity, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. Such a family but addeth to its stature and its lasting honour, as day succeedeth day.[11]

It is also of great importance that the parents themselves set the example for the conduct, morals and values that they are teaching the children, for children learn by example as much as or even more than through words. If the parents want their children to be truthful, then they must be truthful; if they want their children to be free of racism, then they must also be untainted by it; if they want their children to learn the equality of women and men, then the husband and wife must show that quality in their dealings with each other.

The exact structure and composition of the family group is not prescribed in the Bahá'í writings. It may therefore consist of the "nuclear family" or may include members of the "extended family". The emphasis in the Bahá'í teachings is on the processes and relationships within the family unit.

The relationships within the family should reflect what is regarded as the norm for relationships in the Bahá'í community which "is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank

and loving consultation." [12] The role of consultation is given great importance, both as a way of resolving conflicts that may arise, between the marriage partners or between parents and children, and also as a social education for the children.

Each person in the family must be respected as an individual and must be given both the love and the space to develop and grow.

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother - none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honour of one, the honour of all. [13]

Similarly violence towards, vilification or humiliation of husband, wife or children is not an acceptable part of family life. `Abdu'l-Bahá disapproved of the corporal punishment of children.

Children, for their part, are instructed to be respectful and obedient towards their parents and also to appreciate and be grateful for what has been done for them.

Also a father and mother endure the greatest troubles and hardships for their children; and often when the children have reached the age of maturity, the parents pass on to the other world. Rarely does it happen that a father and mother in this world see the reward of the care and trouble they have undergone for their children. Therefore children, in return for this care and trouble, must show forth charity and beneficence, and must implore pardon and forgiveness for their parents. [14]

Education

The primary social function of marriage is to produce children and to train and educate them so that they become moral and spiritual human beings, individuals who will be spiritually content in themselves and useful members of society.

The purport is this, that to train the character of humankind is one of the weightiest commandments of God, and the influence of such training is the same as that which the sun exerteth over tree and fruit. Children must be most carefully watched over, protected and trained; in such consisteth true parenthood and parental mercy.

Otherwise, the children will turn into weeds growing wild, . . . knowing not right from wrong, distinguishing not the highest of human qualities from all that is mean and vile; they will be brought up in vainglory . . .

Wherefore doth every child, new-risen in the garden of Heavenly love, require the utmost training and care. [15]

So important is this task that Bahá'u'lláh raises it to the status of the worship of God:

. . . know ye that in God's sight, the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined.[16]

Education is, therefore, considered very important in the Bahá'í teachings. The basic function of education is outlined in the following quotation from Bahá'u'lláh:

The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.[17]

The Importance of Education

The root cause of wrongdoing is ignorance . . . Good character must be taught. Light must be spread afar, so that, in the school of humanity, all may acquire the heavenly characteristics of the spirit, and see for themselves beyond any doubt that there is no fiercer Hell, no more fiery abyss, than to possess a character that is evil and unsound . . .

The individual must be educated to such a high degree that he would rather have his throat cut than tell a lie . . . Thus will be kindled the sense of human dignity and pride . . .

It followeth that the children's school must be a place of utmost discipline and order, that instruction must be thorough, and provision must be made for the rectification and refinement of character; so that, in his earliest years, within the very essence of the child, the divine foundation will be laid and the structure of holiness raised up.

Know that this matter of instruction, of character rectification and refinement, of heartening and encouraging the child, is of the utmost importance, for such are basic principles of God . . .

It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty is passed. By then, as experience has shown, even if every effort be exerted to modify some tendency of his, it all availeth nothing. He may, perhaps, improve somewhat today; but let a few days pass and he forgetteth, and turneth backward to his habitual condition and accustomed ways. Therefore it is in early childhood that a firm foundation must be laid. While the branch is green and tender it can easily be made straight. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, no. 111, pp. 136-37.)

Each child can potentially therefore be of great benefit to humanity; it can also potentially be of great harm. The goal of educating children is to bring forth individuals who will improve the world through their character.

The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind . . . for education is the indispensable foundation of all human

excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory. . . For the inner reality of man is a demarcation line between the shadow and the light . . . Every child is potentially the light of the world — and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance. From his infancy, the child must be nursed at the breast of God's love, and nurtured in the embrace of His knowledge, that he may radiate light, grow in spirituality, be filled with wisdom and learning, and take on the characteristics of the angelic host. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá)[18]

For these reasons, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says that if a mighty effort is exerted in the matter of education, the result will be a favourable transformation of the world of humanity.[19]

In many societies the idea has grown that the process of education is something that is the responsibility of schools. According to the Bahá'í teachings, however, the process of education begins from the moment of the birth of the child. In some senses, it begins even before this, for the Bahá'í writings include repeated statements about the importance of the education of girls because they will be the first educators of the next generation of children. Thus the mother (and the father) must prepare themselves for the education of their children even before the latter are born.

The earliest education of the child is received in the home and the earliest years are the most important.

The babe, like unto a green and tender branch, will grow according to the way it is trained. If the training be right, it will grow right, and if crooked, the growth likewise, and unto the end of life it will conduct itself accordingly.[20]

‘Abdu'l-Bahá recommends that in the early years, children be taught prayers, and that emphasis be put on character and conduct.[21]

Let the mothers consider that whatever concerneth the education of children is of the first importance . . . Therefore is it incumbent upon the mothers to rear their little ones even as a gardener tendeth his young plants. Let them strive by day and by night to establish within their children faith and certitude . . . the love of the Beloved of the worlds, and all good qualities and traits.

Whensoever a mother seeth that her child hath done well, let her praise and applaud him and cheer his heart; and if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him, and use means based on reason, even a slight verbal chastisement should this be necessary. It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child's character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse.[22]

Prayers of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá for Children

O God! Educate these children. These children are the plants of Thine orchard,

the flowers of Thy meadow, the roses of Thy garden. Let Thy rain fall upon them; let the Sun of Reality shine upon them with Thy love. Let Thy breeze refresh them in order that they may be trained, grow and develop, and appear in the utmost beauty. Thou art the Giver. Thou art the Compassionate. (Bahá'í Prayers, p. 35-6)

O my Lord! O my Lord!

I am a child of tender years. Nourish me from the breast of Thy mercy, train me in the bosom of Thy love, educate me in the school of Thy guidance and develop me under the shadow of Thy bounty! Deliver me from darkness, make me a brilliant light; free me from unhappiness, make me a flower of the rose-garden; suffer me to become the servant of Thy Threshold and confer upon me the disposition and nature of the righteous ones; make me a cause of bounty to the human world, and crown my head with the diadem of eternal life! Verily, Thou art the Powerful, the Mighty, the Seer, the Hearer. (Bahá'í Prayers, p. 37-8)

In later years, children must be sent to school, where they acquire the necessary knowledge to enable them to make a full contribution to society. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that education is of three kinds. The first is physical education, which is concerned with enabling the individual to survive. The second is concerned with enabling the individual to partake of the fruits of human civilization, the arts, sciences, administration, etc. The third is spiritual education which causes the individual to acquire virtues and is thus necessary for that person to become a complete human being.[23] Unfortunately, in the world today, only the first two receive any attention in our schools. And yet the importance of the early years of education and schooling for the establishment of morality and order in society can scarcely be over-stated. Because mothers are the first educators of the next generation, the schooling of girls is to be given priority over that of boys.[24]

Once a firm moral and spiritual foundation has been laid in the character of the child, other subjects can be taught:

. . . Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth . . .[25]

Endnotes

Selections, no. 86, p. 118.

Selections, no. 84, pp. 117-18.

Lights of Guidance, no. 1268, pp. 378-9.

Selections, no. 92, p. 122.

Selections, no. 86, p. 118.

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, v. 70, p. 44.

Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, Compilation, no. 539, p. 241.

Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, no. 839, p. 391.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, no. 113 p.138.

Letter of Universal House of Justice in Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, p. 414.

Selections, no. 836, p. 279.

Shoghi Effendi in Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, p. 413.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 168.

Bahá'í World Faith, pp. 329-30.

`Abdu'l-Bahá in Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, p. 263.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, no. 114, p. 139.

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 162.

Selections, no. 103, pp. 129-31.

Selections, no. 103, p. 130.

Bahá'í World Faith, p. 399.

Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, no. 603, p. 268; 622, p. 278; no. 628-9, pp. 282-3.

Selections, no. 95, pp. 124-5.

Some Answered Questions, p. 8-9.

Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, nos. 630-631, 635, pp. 284, 286.

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 26-27.

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